

agriculturists will keep the ball rolling pretty perseveringly on the congenial themes of "caks, mongoid wurzel, short-horns, reaping machines, and guano; but I have heard ladies, who are perhaps the best judges of volubility, affirm that, for energy, duration, and the faculty of saying the same thing over and over again, a dialogue between a couple of fox-hunters beats every other kind of discussion completely out of the field.

Mr. Sawyer took the initiative by pointing to the fox's tusk which fastened the string in his new friend's hat.

"Done anything this last week?" said he, with that mysterious air especially affected by all individuals who are connected, however remotely, with horseflesh, and which, I believe, has much to answer for, in the impression of consummate roguery which it conveys to the uninitiated. "It's been good scenting weather in my part of the world. Hounds must have run hard on the grass."

The Honorable Crasher emitted a large volume of smoke, ere he roused himself for the effort, and replied: "Good thing, last Friday, with the Pychley, from Fox Hall. Do you know that country?" he added, thinking, if his listener did not, he might save himself the trouble of detailing it.

"I am on my way down to hunt there now," rejoined our friend, "so I take an interest, naturally, in your sport. Last Friday, you say? Ah! that was the day we had such a fine run over our country. Two hours and forty-seven minutes, and killed our fox—and killed our fox," he repeated, as if such a climax was sufficiently rare to merit more than common attention.

Nothing but the spirit of emulation between different packs could have embarked the Honorable Crasher on a long story, but he woke up, from his lethargy at this juncture, and observed:

"Two hours and forty-seven minutes? Indeed! It must have been a fine run; but slow, I include slow. I never care much for anything over an hour. It's labour and slow, walking after hounds, to my mind."

"Slow?" retorted Mr. Sawyer inignant. "Not at all, I was using the best horse in my stable, and he had to do all he knew to live with them. Fine country, too—wild fox hunting country—not a soul in the fields; very deep, and a good deal of fencing. I don't know that I was ever better carried," he added meditatively, hoping to bring the conversation round to the merits of the grey.

But the Honorable Crasher had his story to tell too, and broke in with unusual vehemence:

"Ours was about the quickest thing I ever rode to. Found in Faxon Corner, for never hung a second, and the hounds ran him over the large grass fields as if they were tied to him, all down by—Dear me, I forget the names of the places, and I never can describe a run; but if you don't know the country, it don't signify. In short, they ran him all about, you know, over a capital line, and turned him up in the open, at the end of seven and twenty minutes, without a check, and very straight, you know, and all that; satisfactory to everybody, and not at all bad fun, and so on." The Honorable Crasher was rapidly collapsing, running down like the last notes of a musical box. Ere he arrived at this very explicit conclusion, he had become perfectly torpid again.

Finding his neighbor would not listen to his story Mr. Sawyer thought he might as well get what he could in the way of information, and began according to profound series of questions, only interrupted by the occasional apparition, at the window, of a broad chest and a truly bearded face belonging to the guard, who, seeing the gentlemen still smoking, vanished again continually. The examination proceeded much as follows: the catchmen, though waking up at intervals, becoming more and more comatose.

Mr. Sawyer "It is very stiff, isn't it, that Pychley country? Large fences that

hard, and close as that between a horse and his rider, and Mr. Sawyer hardly liked to confess, even to himself, the very inferior brute he had got in the bay. Somehow all the difficulties into which he had put him seemed to rise in his mind's eye, like an accumulation of photographs, as he sat back amongst the cushions, and, withdrawing his gaze from the outward world, fixed it on the lately-lit lamp above his head.

He remembered, not without a shudder, what a cropper the brute gave him at that stile in the potato-garden, which at least he might have scrambled over, if he had only risen six inches. He recalled the stungus run he lost from the Forty-acres, because no persuasion would induce Marathon to face the bullfinch enclosing that meritorious fox-covert, and which a donkey could get through if he would only look at it. He reflected how the animal perversely

"Struck all his traber, fathomed all his ditches,"

how he had never cleared a brook with him or gone a run to his master's satisfaction; and how even old Isaac allowed his favorite "war a better nag in the stable nor he war in the field," and so musing, he shuddered to think of their joint endeavors to get out of a lousy-acre pasture, with an ox-fence all round it, and the gate locked!

To avoid such horrible visions, he would have plunged once more into conversation, but looking at his neighbor, observed he was now deep in "The Idylls of the King,"—an epic which served at least to keep the Honorable Crasher awake, there by substantiating a theory I have heard broached by certain philosophers, and which I am not entirely prepared to dispute, viz., that there is something of poetry in every man who rides hard across a country.

Certainly not a Knight of the Table Round could have been more daring in the saddle than the Honorable Crasher, for all his dissipated looks and languid manners; nor could he have been so engrossed in the fate of *Eno Lay Mad of Astolat*, nor so lost in the description of the black barge floating drearily down with its snowy burden (perhaps the most beautiful piece of word-painting in the language), had he not acknowledged in some corner of his much-neglected intellect that *divina particula aurea*, which may often be found, like a sweet wayside flower, blooming in the most unexpected and uncultivated localities.

Though Mr. Sawyer was himself innocent of all such weaknesses, he had the grace not to interrupt his fellow-traveller, and consequently not a word more was spoken till they exchanged a courteous "Good-evening, as they glided into the Market-Harborough station, and the new arrival wondered in his own mind how it was possible for any one man to require such a quantity of clothing as must be contained in the numerous portmanteaus which the guard's van produced, and which were claimed by the Honorable Crasher as his own.

"He can't have been a week in town, though, our honest friend, for he was hunting only last Friday, and he takes more clothes with him than I've got for my whole kit in the world!"

He had, however, his own affairs to attend to—himself and his modest luggage to stow away in a damp fly, with a brook waded ere his dinner to order at the principal inn, where he meant to reside—at least, till he found out if he liked his quarters. Forsooth, the traveller, in this matter, committed a most unaccountable mistake. Dazzled by the magnificence of his manners, and the sumptuous verbal bill of fare which the waiter stated to be available, he left the details of his meal to that functionary—an oversight which produced a somewhat untoward result, inasmuch as that, after a visit to his stables, a minute inspection of his horses, and a long consultation with Isaac, concerning which of them he should ride on the morrow, interspersed with many complaints and prognostications of evil from the latter, when he returned to his apartment very

friend, in a sleepy voice, turning, like Dr. Watt's sluggard, into a more comfortable position. At that moment, it would not have broken his heart to be told that it was too hard to hunt.

"Can't see your hand," was the encouraging reply: "it's one of these regular Leicester-sheer fogs, as the grooms tell me, as is wery prevalent hereabouts. The lamps is lit now in the streets; but it'll be wusser up on the high ground. They'll hunt, though, just the same, says they. Weather never stops them here, unless it be the severest of frost and snow, as I understand. Shall I open the shutters, sir?"

Isaac threw them back as he spoke, and drew up the blind, disclosing to Mr. Sawyer's view about eighteen feet of tiles, a weathercock pointing east-south-east, and a chimney adorned with what is called an "old woman"—an ingenious contrivance to prevent it from smoking, but in this instance to judge by the smell of soot which pervaded the apartment, by no means a successful piece of mechanism—the whole wrapped in a mantle of the densest and wettest fog he ever remembered to have seen.

"Sure to be late such a morning as this," thought Mr. Sawyer, preparing for another comfortable half-hour in bed; but then he reflected that he must send Isaac forward with a horse, also that he should have to find his own way to Tilton Wood, on his hack—a sufficiently intricate proceeding as studied overnight by the map, but which might become excessively puzzling when reduced to practice, through large pastures and unknown bridle-gates, on such a morning as the present.

"Take on the grey!" said he, peremptorily, ignoring the cough; "and order breakfast for me in three-quarters of an hour."

The fact is, Mr. Sawyer had but the grey to ride. He did not quite fancy giving the roan his earliest trial in what he understood to be a hilly country; and as for making his first appearance in High Leicestershire on Marathon—really, though both were pretty strong, neither his nerves nor his self conceit would have stood such a test.

Somehow, everything went wrong, as is apt to be the case in a strange place, and when we are particularly anxious for the reverse. He cut himself shaving. His leathers were damp, and badly cleaned; looser, too, at the knees, and tighter in the thighs, than he liked. Also, he couldn't find his button-hook; and any one who has put on boots and breeches without the aid of that implement, will sympathize with his distress. Isaac knew where it was, doubtless, but, ere his master arrived at the stage of toilet at which it was required, Isaac and the grey had made their first wrong turn in the fog, about a mile from the town, on their way to Tilton Wood.

Altogether, by the time The Boy, with rather heavy eyes and an unwashed face, had brought round Jack-a-Dandy, our friend was in that mood which is best described as having "got out of bed with the wrong foot foremost."

Once in the saddle, however, things mended rapidly. No horseman could get upon Jack-a-Dandy without feeling what a good little animal it was, and, indeed, Jack's career had been a somewhat adventurous one. Thorough-bred, but too small to be put in training, he had fallen into the hands of a step-chasing horse-dealer, who took his pedigree, and put him in one or two good hand-caps as "his daughter's pony." Master Jack could jump like a deer, and, with nine stone seven on his back, was quite able to make hunters of considerable pretensions look extremely foolish. This could not go on for ever, and the dealer broke, after which, Jack carried the drunken whip of a pack of Irish foxhounds for two seasons, and, when that establishment "busted up," found his way once more into his native country, as leader in a young gentleman's tandem, who tried to graduate at Oxford. Pending the failure of that acolyte, he had a good deal of fun at Bullingdon, winning cleverly whenever he had a chance, and only left the University because his master did, who took him

obscurity—and then found himself riding round and round the same field, with extraordinary perseverance, and not the remotest chance of escape.

He would have liked, now, to get back again into the lands; but he could not even hit the gate at which he entered, and had embarked upon the tedious process of coasting the field methodically, for that purpose, and giving up all idea of hunting for the day, when, much to his relief, he spied a gigantic object looming through the fog, which, on a nearer approach, proved to be nothing larger than a horseman, cantering confidently towards him.

On inspection, this timely arrival turned out to be the Honorable Crasher, with an enormous cigar in his mouth, looking more tired than ever, and, apparently, quite unconscious of the fog and everything else. With an effort, however, he recognized his fellow-traveller of the day before, and courteously offered to guide him—a proposal which the latter accepted with great readiness.

"I had almost lost myself," said he, "what with this thick fog, and not knowing the country."

To which the Honorable Crasher replied, "Y-e-e-s—it makes one cough, but it's all plain sailing now," and broke into a gallop.

Poor Mr. Sawyer! If he had only known it! His guide was one of the many gentlemen who could hunt twenty years from the same place, and never know the shortest way from one point to another.

CHAPTER VII.

A LEICESTERSHIRE LARK.

By good luck one pair of the lost sheep soon hit the bridle gate Mr. Sawyer had been seeking in vain.

"I suppose it's all right," said the Honorable Crasher, putting his horse into a canter, with the loose rein and easy off hand seat peculiar to a gentleman riding to covert.

Mr. Sawyer, following close in his wake devoutly hoped it was so; but had little leisure for considering the subject, inasmuch as his energies were completely engrossed by the delicate task of gammoning the Dandy that he didn't want to put at him. He knew too well, by the way his little horse's ears were laid back, that he was fully prepared, and only sought an excuse, to come with a rush at the shortest possible notice.

They went on pleasantly enough for a mile or so, the Honorable leading, and commencing a variety of courteous remarks to his follower, which invariably broke off in the middle. At last, the former pulled up with an air of uncertainty.

"Very odd," he said; "often as I've come this way before, I never remember the gate locked." He had put his whip confidently under the latch, and his horse's chest against the top, without the slightest effect. "For my soul it seems rather absurd, but I do believe we've lost our way."

"We," thought Mr. Sawyer: "and this fiend in top-boots laughs as if it were a joke!" but he only said aloud, "I shall get down and take it off its hinges."

The Honorable's reply was simple and conclusive. He pointed to the upper hinge, craftily turned downward, so as effectually to prevent all tampering with it, and observed in a tone of melancholy apology, "The fence seems rather a bad one" (it was an "oxer," about seven feet high, and impervious to a bird!). "Do you think your horse could get over the gate after mine? This is only a five-year-old, and very likely to break it," he added, with the manner of a nurse tempting a child to take its dose.

I have said Mr. Sawyer was a brave man, and so he was, but I am bound to confess the proposition startled him not a little. Put yourself in his place, courteous reader, and

by which he was encompassed. To this day Mr. Sawyer has not left off talking about this his first ride over High Leicestershire. After a bottle of port, he even becomes heterodox for so good a sportsman, and vows he would rather gallop to covert over those grass-fields, than see a run in any other country in the world. I have my doubts, however, whether he enjoyed it so very much at the time. Jack put him down twice; first at an ox-fence, of which the rail was from him, and which, although his leader hit it very hard, deluded the unsuspecting Dandy; and secondly, by landing on a covered drain which gave way with him, and superinduced one of those falls that are generally designated "collar-boners." On this occasion the Honorable Crasher brought him back his horse, with quite a radiant expression of countenance.

"What a good little animal it is!" said he, throwing the reins back over his neck. "I'm trying to 'crop' this beggar of mine, and I very soon should, if I had to follow you."

In effect, the chestnut's head and bridle-band were plastered over with mud, although his ride a cont was as yet unstained.

At Skington, they relapsed into a quiet trot, and rode on together, feeling as if they could realize the fact, that twenty-four hours ago they were utter strangers to each other.

It is odd how people cast up at a meet of fox hounds, from all sorts of different directions, even on the most unpromising mornings. Though the fog was as thick as ever at the top of the hill, and Tilton Wood, at no time the best of places to "get away from," was perfectly invisible at two hundred yards' distance, there was already a good sprinkling of sportsmen assembled at the fixture. Two or three "swells" from Melton, very much the pattern of the Honorable Crasher, had arrived on their smoking hacks, and were greeted by him with considerable cordiality. Truth to tell, the Honorable dearly loved what he called a customer, meaning simply an individual who was fool enough to rate his neck at the value he did his own; and, indeed, he never would have taken so affably to Mr. Sawyer on such short notice, had the latter not been fortunate enough to possess an excellent hack hunter in Jack-a-Dandy, and bold enough to make very free use of that jumping little animal; the hounds, too, had already arrived, and in the glimpse which Mr. Sawyer caught of them as he rode up, he was sportsman enough to remark that they looked speedy, stout, level, and uncommonly fit to go. Such a pack, he thought, would not even have disgraced the Old County! the huntsman also seemed to afford the nappy combination of a riding as well as a hunting one; and the other servants were remarkably well mounted, and looked like business. Mr. Sawyer began to feel quite keen, and to look about for Isaac and the grey, who had not made their appearance; the other Harborough hunters, however, had not yet come up; their grooms had, probably, taken the chance of a late meet to refresh in a body somewhere on the road; there was nothing for it but to light a cigar, and wait patiently for more daylight.

Two or three clever-looking horses with side-saddles, denoted that if the weather had been more propitious, the same number of fair equestrians would have graced the field. Mr. Sawyer particularly remarked a very neat chestnut, apparently, like the groom who led it, exceedingly loath to be ordered home. A peremptory gentleman, in particularly good boots and breeches, with a clerical white neckcloth, and black coat, who had just arrived on wheels, seemed to be the proprietor of this shapely animal.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A canary recently escaped from a cage in Brussels. A hen chased it, captured it, and returned it to its mistress.